PREVENTIVE ETHICS IN ACTION: USING THE ISSUES APPROACH TO PROTECT PATIENT DATA

*P*reventive ethics offers VHA facilities a systematic way to identify, prioritize, and address ethics quality gaps on a systems level. VA New York Harbor Healthcare System (VANYHHS) PE Coordinator Margaret McGibbon, L.C.S.W., discusses how she used the principles and practices of PE to address staff observations at two campuses that shredder bins containing patient records were occasionally becoming over-full. Concerned about patient confidentiality she, in collaboration with Sathya Maheswaran, M.D., (IEPO), facilitated a simple but highly effective ISSUES cycle described below.

How was the issue identified?

Staff members were being reminded frequently to keep sensitive patient information private, and they were placing a lot of data and paperwork into the shredder bins. When a survey team was present at our campus for "Privacy Rounds," I noticed that some shredder bins were overfilled.

After talking with staff and surveying bins in other areas and at the St. Albans campus, I realized that this problem extended beyond our area. We decided to employ the ISSUES approach in seeking a solution. In clarifying that the goal was to protect patient confidentiality by ensuring that facility shredder bins should not become over-full, we performed the first ISSUES step: to identify an issue.

What specific data were gathered about your current processes?

We discussed the concern with staff in the affected areas, as well as with the secretary from the Executive Office, and contacted the Environmental Management Service (EMS, the service responsible for emptying bins) and the Privacy Officer. We sought information regarding the schedule for emptying the bins and who was responsible for determining if this schedule needed to be altered. We also informed the Associate Director.

How was a strategy for improving the current practice selected?

We agreed that the best approach was to ensure that bins would be emptied when they were almost full, instead of relying on a fixed schedule.
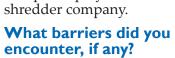
How did you undertake a plan (ISSUES step 4)?

After introducing the issue in an e-mail with EMS and the Privacy Officer, we placed labels on the bins listing a contact person/extension to be called when that a bin was nearly full.

What was accomplished?

I have been spot-checking the bins regularly throughout my work day, including those that were initially found to be full. I have also checked other areas, and have not noted any full or nearly full bins. Now, at the New York and St. Albans campuses, if bins are full or approaching full, the contents are emptied and placed in a locked room before pick-up by the contracted shredder company.

What barriers did you encounter, if any?

At the New York campus, we did not know the process for emptying the bins, which required investing time and numerous phone calls. If the information had been readily available on the bin, the problem could have been solved much more easily. At the St. Albans campus, however, staff members were aware of the process for emptying bins. Their barrier was to adjust the pick-up schedule. (continued)

The ISSUES Approach

Identify an issue
Study the issue
Select a strategy
Undertake a plan
Evaluate and adjust
Sustain and spread

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How will you sustain this practice (ISSUES step 6)?

While monitoring implementation of this strategy, I noted that labels were still not affixed on all bins in either campus. I will follow up with the Privacy Officer to ensure this occurs.

What lessons did you learn?

VANYHHS is a multi-campus facility. Although part of the same system, each facility has its own unique characteristics. Consequently, each issue must be looked at specifically within the context of the work group/campus. This situation was resolved in a satisfactory manner at each campus, through different staff and means.

What is the value of working on small, discrete ISSUES cycles?

When learning something new, it's good to start small and succeed. By starting on small projects, one can more easily gain focus, measure results, and familiarize staff with the process. Also, the lessons learned are clear and evident. PE teams can then build on this success by taking on more challenging projects. Small projects, too, can make a big difference in improving health care ethics practices. Both types of projects are important to pursue, but in a step-wise manner that builds from the simple to the more complex in order to support PE team learning.

Our second project involved identifying the legal next of kin for our veteran patients. From our work on this ISSUES cycle, we learned that complex ethics issues will likely need to be broken down into sub-issues that require one or more cycles.

Margaret McGibbon, L.C.S.W., is a Social Work Case Manager in the Infectious Diseases Department at NYHHS for veterans with HIV/AIDS. Sathya Maheswaran, M.D., is a geriatrician at NYHHS who coordinates the geriatric clinic and Home-Based Primary Care Program. Address questions to Ms. McGibbon at margaret.mcgibbon2@va.gov, or (212) 951-3355.

For Ethics Consultations

Please Contact :
• ext. ETHIC (38442) or ext. 32434
• pager 269-410-2207
• any of the patient representatives

VISIBILITY IS IMPORTANT: INFORM ALL STAFF ABOUT IE USING SCREENSAVERS

After IntegratedEthics was launched at VAMC Saginaw, IEPO Judith Davidson, ACSW LMSW, was looking for a way to increase staff awareness of the new initiative across the facility. VAMC Saginaw was already using screensavers to disseminate quick information on Joint Commission preparedness and other topics so IE team members designed a preventive ethics screensaver. She also asked for samples of IE screensavers for other facilities using the IE listserv. In response, she received an ethics consultation screensaver (pictured here) from VAMC Battle Creek.

IE topics are now included in the rotating cycle of screensavers that populate the computers of all 800 staff members at Saginaw. Ms. Davidson reports that they have been very effective in conveying to staff that IE is an active program at the facility, and not "just another topic on the staff orientation agenda."

When developing and screensavers, Ms. Davidson offered the following advice:

• To ensure people continue to pay attention, change the background, wording, layout, font, etc., frequently.

• Dark-colored backgrounds are not as effective as light-colored backgrounds with dark print.

• When designing the screen savers, tap into the computer expertise of students from local universities who are working at the facility to get graphics help.

For further information, Judith Davidson can be reached at Judy.Davidson@va.gov or (989) 497-2500, ext. 11766. **Both Judy's screensaver and the one pictured above are available at vaww.ethics.va.gov/integratedethics/IE-action.asp**